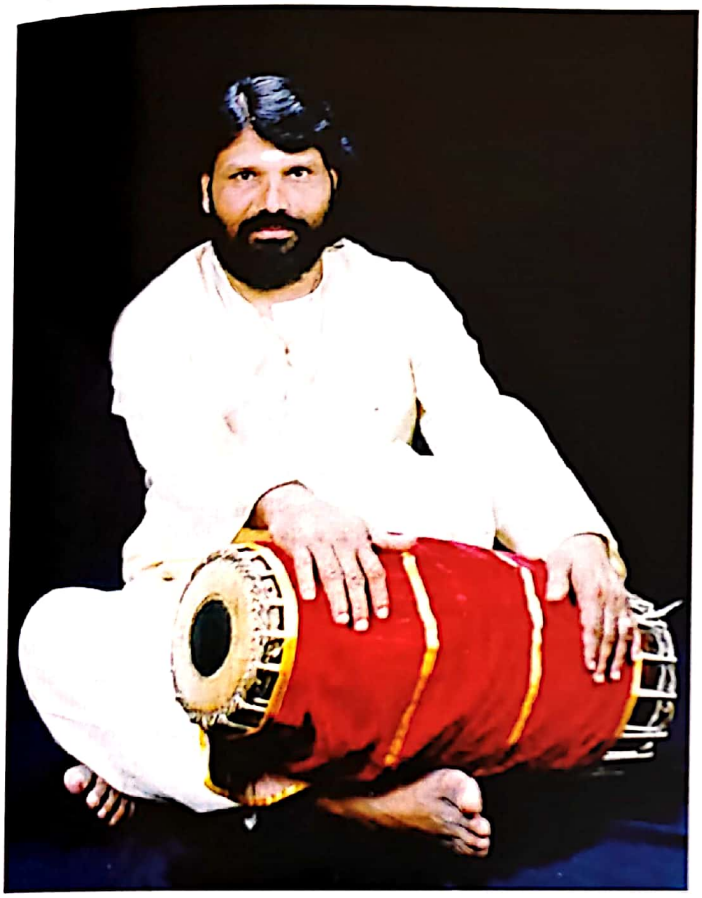
T.S. Nandakumar: A life in rhythm

Lakshmi Ramamurthy

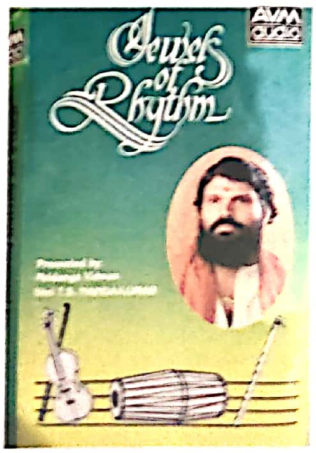


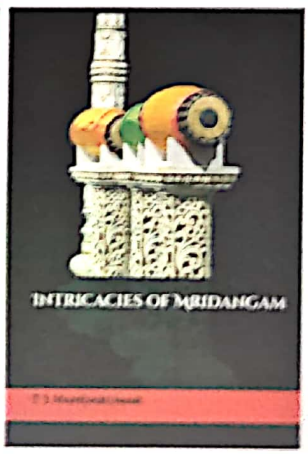
With a career spanning over five decades, mridangam vidwan T.S. Nandakumar (TSN) began his musical journey in Bombay before moving to the United States, where he is now based in New Jersey. Affectionately known as 'TSN Sir' to his students and 'Bombay Nandakumar' among fellow musicians, he has shared the stage with many of India's distinguished artists.

Born on 17 March 1958, into a family steeped in music—his uncles were the well-known Ambalapuzha Brothers—Nandakumar was drawn to rhythm early in life. Growing up near temple precincts, where his father worked with the Devaswom Board, he was surrounded by the sounds of Carnatic music and percussion. Inspired by the temple kutcheris and the performances of great mridangam and tavil vidwans, he began his training at the age of four under mridangam vidwan Kaithavana Madhavadas.

After several decades in Bombay, during which he worked closely with leading sabhas such as Shanmukhananda Fine Arts, Chembur Fine Arts, Music Triangle, Naadalaya Fine Arts, and Ganakala Vidya Nilayam, Nandakumar moved to the United States in 2008. Having already spent time teaching and performing there in the late 1990s and early 2000s, he saw in the move an opportunity to reach wider audiences and nurture the next generation of students abroad.

As a composer, Nandakumar has created several works including *Jewels of Rhythm* (Volumes 1, 2, and 3), *Vibrative Rhythms*, and has authored books such as *Roots of Mridangam* and *Intricacies of Mridangam*. In 1998, he founded the TSN Percussive Arts Centre (TSNPAC), an institution dedicated to music education and performance. Through TSNPAC, he continues to mentor students, organise concerts, and collaborate with musicians across India and abroad.





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About TSNPAC

Founded on 7 February 1998 in Bombay and inaugurated by V. Subramaniam, former minister of Maharashtra, TSN's Percussive Arts Centre (TSNPAC) was later incorporated in New Jersey, USA, with the mission of promoting Carnatic music. The centre serves as a hub for learning percussion instruments such as mridangam, ghatam, khanjira, tavil, morsing, and konnakol. Over the years, TSNPAC has organised several Tyagaraja festivals and annual concerts featuring eminent artists including T.N. Krishnan, N. Rajam, A. Kanyakumari, L. Subramaniam, K.J. Yesudas, N. Ramani, and T.K. Govinda Rao, with students of the centre often performing alongside them.

TSNPAC Award to A. Kanyakumari and Trichy Sankaran

Nandakumar accompanying L. Subramaniam...

...K.J. Yesudas

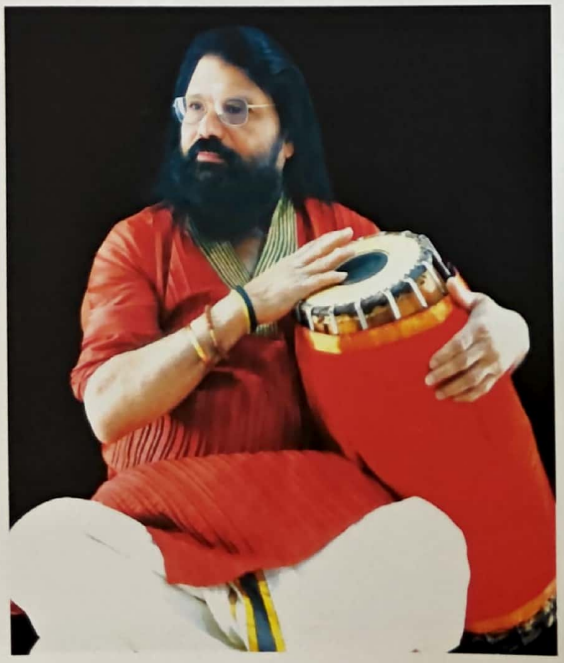
In conversation with T.S. Nandakumar

What is your earliest memory of discovering your passion for the mridangam?

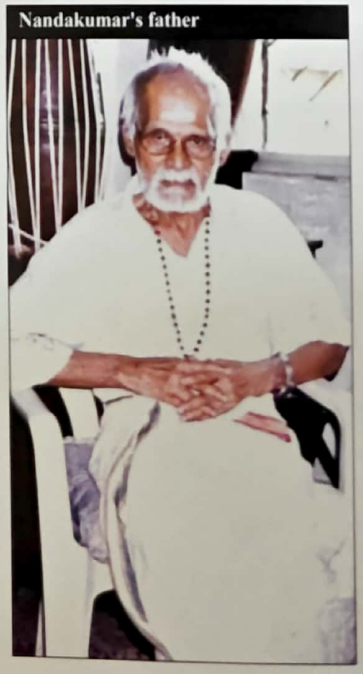
During my childhood in Ambalapuzha, I spent much of my time at the temple. Every morning before school, I would go there, listening to the mridangam sounds resonating against the stone walls of the shrine. Among all the musical elements, it was the mridangam that captured my attention. I remember one particular occasion when I was listening to an ensemble, following the tala intently. The mridangist, Kaithavana Madhavadas noticed me and, after the concert, invited me to try tapping on his instrument. I can still recall the feel of the drum—the smooth centre, the rougher edges, and the deep, resonant sound of the thoppi. That moment left a strong impression on me.

Seeing my interest, my father took me to meet Kaithavana Madhavadas Sir, the next day, who became my guru. I began my training under him in the gurukula system, and his guidance shaped my foundation. Under his mentorship, I not only learnt to play the mridangam but also imbibed his discipline, humility, and deep love for the art.

I still remember the early days of practice—hours spent repeating the basic lessons on a small cylindrical block of wood before moving on to the real instrument. When I finally played on the mridangam itself, I could feel the power and fullness of the sound. The process was rigorous, but it built both strength and sensitivity, and it remains one of the most valuable parts of my training.



Nandakumar's father



Guru Kaithavana Madhavadas

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What has been the most memorable concert of your life?

Every concert I played with senior artists was memorable, but I particularly remember performing with M.D. Ramanathan Mama. He sang *Vatapi Ganapatim* for nearly an hour, the concert went well, and I still have the ara kattai mridangam used for that concert.

Accompanying Mangalam Muthuswami...

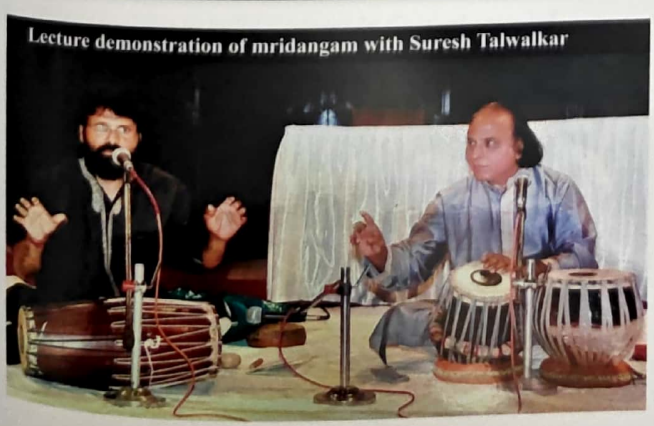
What do you consider the hallmark of good mridangam accompaniment?

The hallmark of good mridangam accompaniment has evolved over time. In earlier years, the approach was quite different — the mridangist would adapt their touch, playing either hard or soft depending on the main artist's style and the concert setting. Today, with advanced acoustics and powerful microphones, even a light stroke can sound loud or metallic.

To me, the true hallmark of fine mridangam accompaniment lies in the nadam and in maintaining perfect sruti. The mridangam must always complement the main artist rather than overpower them. During the tani avartanam, it is important to demonstrate skill with clarity—each stroke must be precise, and every sound distinctly heard.

In the past, I have performed numerous concerts without microphones, where the artist had complete control over the sound. Those experiences taught me how to produce natural volume and clarity from the instrument itself — a quality I continue to value while accompanying even today.

...R.K. Srikantan



Lecture demonstration of mridangam with Suresh Talwalkar

Over the years, you've collaborated with many artists across different fields, including dance. Could you tell us about some of these collaborations?

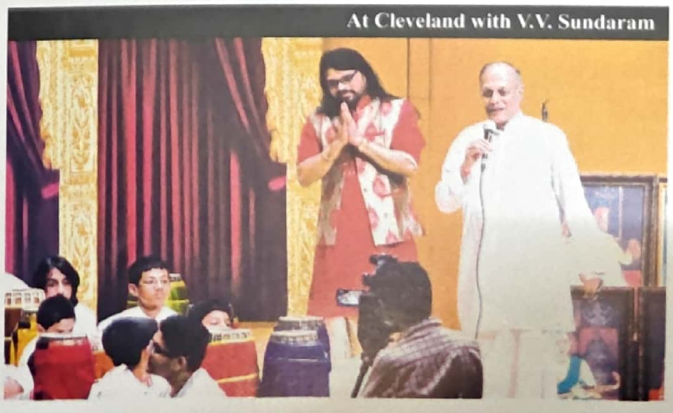
I first began accompanying dance performances in Kerala and continued doing so after moving to Mumbai. I've had the privilege of playing for Kamala Teacher, Jayanthi Subramaniam, and several others. Playing for dance has always been a wonderful experience—it demands close coordination between the dancer and the percussionist, a deep understanding of rhythm, expression, and movement.

...Radha Namboodiri

After some time, I had to step back from performing for dance, as rehearsals required long hours, and I wanted to devote more time to teaching and leading my tala-vadya concerts, where I trained students to accompany on different percussion instruments. Eventually, I began preparing my students to play for dance recitals instead. Many of them continue to perform for dance programs, both in Mumbai and here in the U.S., which gives me great satisfaction.

Having participated regularly in the Cleveland Tyagaraja Festival, how would you describe your journey and experiences there?

Every year, V.V. Sundaram Mama invites me to present at the Cleveland Tyagaraja Festival. Each year, I design a new sequence and train students to perform it. The preparation is extensive — I teach over a hundred students across various percussion instruments such as mridangam, ghatam,



At Cleveland with V.V. Sundaram

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At the Cleveland Tyagaraja Festival

khanjira, tavil, morsing, and konnakol, and also guide those playing melodic instruments like veena, violin, and flute within the ensemble. Since the sequence changes annually, the training spans several months and involves students from different batches. Prior to the final presentation, we hold rehearsals at a venue to ensure precision in coordination and timing. I also make it a point that all students selected for Cleveland first perform at the TSNPAC annual programme, which helps assess synchronisation. They further participate in the TSNPAC Tyagaraja Festival to gain familiarity with the pancharatna kritis before taking part in the Cleveland performance.

Guru-sishya Talavadya Concert at Pune Festival (1995)

What are your thoughts on teaching percussion online, especially to younger students for whom fingering is so critical? How do you monitor and guide their technique effectively in an online environment?

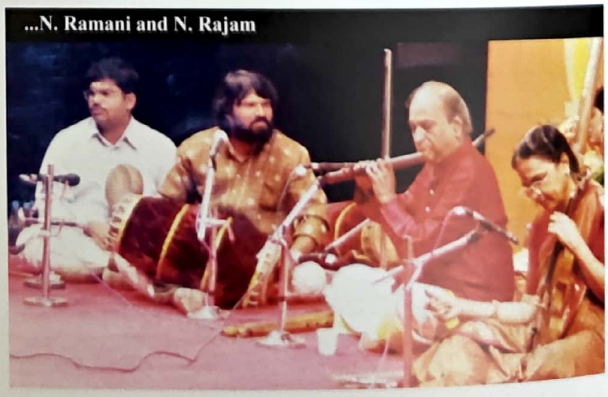
Online teaching definitely has its challenges, especially for younger students learning percussion instruments. One of the main difficulties is dealing with internet connectivity issues, which can sometimes interrupt the class. To overcome this, I use a large screen and a strong internet connection, so I can clearly observe the student's finger positions and hand movements. I also guide them to set up the camera properly so that their playing is clearly visible during class. In addition, I make it a point to visit them in person at least once to check their posture, hand technique, and ensure they are playing efficiently and correctly. This personal interaction helps me assess their progress more accurately and maintain the quality of training.

How do you coordinate rehearsals between your students and the main artist in the U.S. when preparing for an arangetram, and what challenges do you typically encounter?

Regarding the arangetrams, I make sure that my students do not have prior rehearsals with the main artist before their performance. I train them in such a way that they will be able to accompany any artist with confidence. I believe that if the student can perform confidently with the main artist without prior rehearsal, they will be able to accompany any artist with ease. In the U.S., vidushi Kanyakumari typically

...A. Kanyakumari

Accompanying T.N. Krishnan...


...N. Ramani and N. Rajam

plays for my student's arangetrams, and I am grateful that she accepts my invitation. When I was in Bombay, vidwans T.N. Krishnan and N. Ramani would play for my students' arangetrams. One of the main challenges in the U.S. is instrument maintenance and repair. We often have to send mridangams to India for repair. Ordering instruments from India and having them delivered here also takes a significant amount of time.

What are the challenges and limitations that you have faced and still facing in your career?

One of the main challenges I face, especially here in the U.S., is that most students are very busy with multiple activities. They have several other extracurricular classes to attend. As a result, it becomes difficult for them to dedicate focused time and attention to any one pursuit. I often have to adjust my schedule. In addition, since music is just one of their many activities, there is always an inner competition among their different interests. I need to make sure that Carnatic music stands out, keeps them engaged and inspired, thereby helping them see the beauty and depth of playing the mridangam.

You clearly have a deep sense of care for your students. What do you consider the most important lesson you wish to pass on—especially to those growing up in the United States?

From a young age, my guru instilled in me the importance of mutual respect—both for elders and for music itself.

Through my teaching, I try to create a community that respects people and music. I encourage my students to value their culture and traditions, much like my guru taught me, even if the same gurukula system cannot be followed today. Not every student will go on to become a professional musician, and that's perfectly fine. What matters to me is that they develop a genuine appreciation for their Indian heritage.

I also learn from my students. Whether they are five or eighty-five, each brings a unique perspective and enthusiasm to the class. When I accompany artists—junior or senior—I remind myself to stay open and observant, because there is always something to learn. That spirit of respect and continuous learning is what I hope to pass on.

What advice would you give to young aspiring percussionists or musicians looking to build a career in Carnatic music?

For students learning Carnatic music, it helps when parents actively play and encourage listening to music at home. Attending kutcheris is equally important—it allows students to observe and learn how to accompany different artists and banis. Consistent practice of basics and mastering finger techniques are key to achieving clarity in sound.

(The author is a Carnatic music and cultural enthusiast based in New Jersy)

PHOTOS BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

With Mattannoor Sankaranakutty Marar

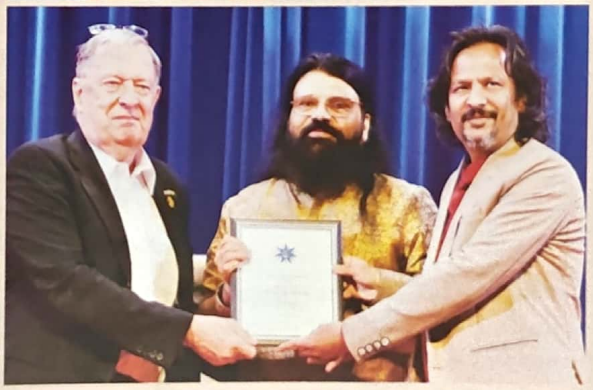
Awards

*** Dr. M.S Subbulakshmi Sangeetha Pracharya Award from Shanmukhanandha Fine Arts, Mumbai in the year 2007**

*** LifeTime Achievement Award from Shanthi Arts Foundation and Endowments, Chennai in the year 2005**

*** Best Teacher Award from Bhairavi Fine Arts (Cleveland Tyagaraja Group) in the year 2013**

*** Excellence Award from the State and General Assembly, New Jersey in the year 2018**



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